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## THE COMBINATION OF CERTIFICATE AND EXAMINATION SYSTEMS<sup>1</sup>

JAMES R. ANGELL  
The University of Chicago

### I

The history of college-entrance requirements in the United States is one of relative quiet and peace until the rapid development of the public-school system of the Middle West and the appearance of the great state universities. So long as the secondary school had substantially no function but that of preparing students for college the problems were relatively simple and the right of the college to dictate what should be done in the preparatory course was rarely questioned.

The situation today is of quite another character. The public educational system, in the West at least, presents a unified organization with the kindergarten at one end and the graduate or professional school at the other. The system being a unit, its parts naturally hang together, and the certificate which witnesses the completion of one portion of the curriculum leads without more ado to entrance upon the next stage.

Facts and theory, however, are somewhat at outs even here. In such a system the college may, and in point of fact often does, lay down the standards to which the school must conform if its

<sup>1</sup> An address delivered December 1, 1911, at Columbia University, before the Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools of the Middle States and Maryland.

graduates are to be received into the college. But the school is primarily accountable to the demands of its own community, and in ever-increasing degree is conforming its curricula to the apparent needs of its immediate constituency—in particular to that part which has no purpose of going to college. Moreover, this same high school is evincing a most active disposition to extend its work one or two years beyond the point at which the college nominally begins its labors. Evidently, therefore, it is not all skittles and beer even for the state university resting upon the certificating public high school.

The comfortable theory on which, until recently, we have for the most part proceeded in this country, is that that education which best fits for college is also the best for the boy who does not go to college. This tenet has been regarded by many of our college authorities as a profound and almost sacred truth, by others as an interesting truism, and by many school men as merely an entertaining jest. It is easy to see why a college which designates with great rigidity the preparatory course of its students should feel under obligation to defend the sanctity of this position. It is also easy to understand why the public-school men, alive to the obligations of the high school to community life, should regard the practical application of the doctrine as often ridiculous. Whether the principle be true or false, it is quite clear that, in all but a very few of our colleges, the general trend is toward permitting a material increase in the flexibility of the preparatory course. Certainly the schools are now given far greater latitude than was formerly the case, and as a result they are able to work out their own ideals without thereby debarring their students from the possibility of entering college.

In the last analysis practically all these problems reduce to the question of one's conception of the function of the college on the one hand and the secondary school on the other. Certainly no solution will ever be satisfactory which does not view the situation in the largest possible way, with full regard to the prodigious complexity of modern life and to the consequent necessity for almost unlimited range, variety, and flexibility in its educational arrangements.

## II

In theory, college-entrance examinations have served two principal functions. They have been designed primarily to sort out the scholarly sheep from the ignorant goats. Incidentally they have afforded to schools a tangible criterion of the quality of work actually demanded by the college. In practice, both of these functions have often gone astray. The unfit student has, by hook or by crook, crowded under or over or through the examination bars, frequently staggering under a burden of conditions; the fit student has occasionally fallen by the way; and the schools, in interpreting the demands of the college, have sometimes been led to follow after strange gods, unknown in the pantheon of rational education. By tinkering here and patching there the system had been rendered moderately seaworthy, when suddenly, and coincidentally with the unprecedented development of the public high schools, the whole concern is found to be leaking and in imminent danger of foundering. We are invited today to consider briefly certain substitutes which have been proposed and certain modifications which have already been put into operation.

Let us at the outset distinguish clearly between two closely related but nevertheless independent and distinct issues. The first of these has to do with the influence which the college exercises over the curricula of the school by demanding that this, that, and the other study shall be pursued for such a length of time and in such a specified manner. The other is concerned with the devices by which the college undertakes to test whether or not these demands have been satisfactorily met. When the distinction is stated thus baldly, the two things appear obviously separate. But in many discussions of the merits and defects of entrance systems the two are confused, or at least treated as substantially identical. In the considerations herewith offered I shall have in mind the latter of these problems, that is, the immediate methods of determining fitness for entrance into college.

A casual inspection of the field makes it clear that we can readily distinguish three main schemes or systems by which the college decides what applicants it will receive. There is, first, the outright old-fashioned examination system, under which the

candidate presents himself prepared to undergo tests covering certain specifically designated subjects. There is, second, the certificate system, in accordance with which graduates of certain approved schools are permitted to enter without examination. Sometimes this privilege is contingent upon the student's having secured a grade distinctly higher than that necessary to receive the diploma of the school. There is, third, the system of combined examination and certification, of which at least three variant forms are known to the writer.<sup>1</sup>

The first is that represented in the University of Pennsylvania. It may be described as a denaturalized certificate system. It will be discussed somewhat more fully at a later point. But in substance it consists in the scrutinizing of the candidate's school record by a committee of the faculty, authorized to accept the record of any or all of the preparatory work in lieu of an examination. The next is that of Columbia University, which by contrast may be described as a denaturalized examination system. Under this system a candidate goes through all the motions of an examination, but after he has completed them a special committee or a special officer, considering the results of the examination in conjunction with all the data available from the school and elsewhere, may grant him entrance although he has failed in the examination test or reject him although he has passed. This system also will be briefly considered at a later point. There is, finally, the new Harvard system, which appears to be a sort of limited-liability device, in accordance with which the student submits certain samples of his intellectual wares for examination and presents for the remainder of his justification the credentials of his school work.

Before entering upon a discussion of these more recent inventions the writer would beg indulgence for a few comments upon the three main types of entrance systems now in vogue, for the situation, to be understood, requires the perspective thus afforded. And first, the examination system.

<sup>1</sup> The author understands that the authorities of one at least of the institutions to be mentioned resent vigorously the implication that their plan involves the certificate system in any way whatever. All three of the universities referred to may share this contention. The classification here employed must, therefore, be understood as purely personal. The reader may judge for himself how far it is justified.

The most remarkable things are found true of this system. A scheme designed in the first instance to serve the innocent purpose of informing the college authorities whether a given lad may properly cast in his lot with the college is discovered to be operating so as to produce all sorts of unwelcome secondary consequences. It may, for instance, occasion a highly specialized and circumscribed patronage, one from which many valuable elements are lacking. At least this appears to be true where the system is brought into competition with the certification plan. Thus Harvard College finds herself drawing her students increasingly from New England, with only meager representation in the patronage of students from remoter parts of the country. Rightly or wrongly she attributes this fact to her entrance-examination system, and forthwith proceeds to amend it. Furthermore, under the influence of the examination system, with the specifications for preparatory work which this has carried with it, a class of schools has grown up whose exclusive function it is to train students for college. The curricula of such schools are aimed solely at this end, and their authorities become weatherwise in college-entrance examinations to a degree that is fairly weird. Needless to say, these are almost exclusively private institutions, catering to a relatively wealthy constituency. In the nature of the case such schools are essentially obliged to abandon the larger part of their independence; they make but little contribution to the intellectual solution of the broader problems of secondary education, and in general they are likely to take on an educationally parasitic hue. This is not to deny the conspicuous virtues possessed by the best of them.

Again, this system, so innocent in its intent, so pregnant of the unexpected, has brought in its train the professional coach, with his uncanny skill in safely guiding the veriest blockhead through the tortuous catacombs of college examinations. He is familiar with every trail in darkest calculus, and the Alpine passes of Greek prose and Latin grammar contain no terrors for him. He is a specialist beside whom the ordinary college professor appears a green, raw amateur.

Most disheartening of all, the system fails in a distressing number of cases to serve its major purpose. The well-coached

scalawag may get through only to be cast into outer darkness again at the end of six months or a year, whereas now and again the competent lad falls by the wayside, to the common disadvantage of himself and the college.

Over against these troubles—and we might have mentioned many more—must be set certain of the claims entered by the advocates of an examination system in its favor. In the first instance, it is urged that the college should be the sole arbiter of the fitness or unfitness of candidates for admission, and that only under the examination plan is its dignity and autonomy adequately protected. In the second place, it is said to be eminently wholesome for the student to be obliged to meet a severe test set in a purely objective way by disinterested and competent persons, who have not supervised his preparatory work. In the third place, it is alleged that the system is stimulating to schools, in that they know their work will be judged rigorously, not in accord with its pretensions, but in accord with its actual accomplishment in the training of students. These accomplishments can be tested by any fair examination, so runs the argument.

The plea that only under the examination system can the college preserve independence of action is essentially specious and is generally put forward only when it is desired to make a comparison unfavorable to the certificate system. No college contracts to accept the certificate of a given school to the end of time and the crack of doom, regardless of the conduct of the school. Approval is given subject to certain obvious limitations, and is revocable at will. The college temporarily delegates its authority, as it may in the case of an examination conducted, for example, by a general board, like that of the association here gathered. If the privilege be abused, it may be withdrawn. The situation is in many ways parallel to that of entrance into a graduate school upon presentation of the diploma of a reputable college. The autonomy of a college which could be seriously shaken by such a temporary delegation of its rights must be a highly fragile and delicate affair.

We are all familiar with the changes which our college presidents ring on the tonic effect of college examinations, provided they preside over institutions which admit by this system. The

president of Harvard University, for example, speaks of the necessity of feeding our young eaglets strong meat—the meat in this case being put up in the form of examinations. The president of Columbia University refers to the examination system as affording an admirable foretaste of the rigors, not to say horrors, of later life. From all sides we are assured that entrance examinations tend to breed a peculiarly self-reliant and courageous strain in the candidates. However this may be, there can be no question that most of the victims are well scared before they get through. The general virtues claimed for examinations of all sorts are especially predicated of this variety, set by strangers in a strange place.

At this juncture the issue is likely to become a trifle confused. Arguments which, if valid, apply to examinations in general are brought forward as peculiarly applicable to the examination used to determine eligibility for college entrance. One may freely admit the desirability of occasional examinations, whether conducted by the school authorities or by persons brought in from outside to discharge this special function, without being ready to agree that, in view of all its other drawbacks, including the vast expenditure of time and energy, this single virtue is sufficient to justify the continuance of the examination entrance system. The whole level of discussion has too often been that of an attempt to weigh the immediate advantages and disadvantages of a particular plan, rather than to orient the problem in its larger relations to education as a whole. So long as the institution, rather than the student, is made the unit of consideration, whether it be the secondary school, the college, or the professional school which is magnified, the outcome is sure to be short-sighted and warped. Moreover, such a method of attacking the problem is certain to create difficulties of an entirely factitious character. The mind of the student, whom we are attempting to educate, grows progressively from stage to stage. To treat it as though at a given time it ceased altogether one type of development and forthwith began an entirely new type is to do violence to the plain facts. If our institutions involve such abrupt transitions, such unoccupied lacunae, so much the worse for them. Fortunately for the interests at stake, an increasing sanity of judgment on the part of college authorities is abundantly shown in

such measures as those taken at Pennsylvania, Columbia, and Harvard, to which reference was made a little since.

In passing, however, let it be said that if one must have an examination system, experience would certainly seem to justify the belief that it is best administered by a board representing many institutions. Only thus can it be safeguarded from the idiosyncrasies of the individual examiner in the particular college.

There can be no doubt that the examination system has served to stimulate the work of preparatory schools in the directions demanded by the college. It is far from clear, however, that as a secondary consequence there has not been a slighting of work which the school undertakes to carry on but which the college does not specially require. Moreover, many other devices have been extremely successful in promoting the attainment of high standards by the school. To some of these we shall presently refer.

All things considered, the strongest single claim of the entrance-examination system for perpetuation resides in its moral effect upon the student. This is often unequivocally good. It is sometimes all but unequivocally bad, forcing into the foreground of the student's consciousness, as the all-important end, the mere passing of a test. It seems well to reiterate, however, that this moral advantage can be gained inside the school, without obliging one to adopt the system for college entrance, and thus fall heir to its partly undesirable consequences.

The orthodox form of the certificate system involves the inspection of the school at frequent intervals by college officers. Certain institutions employ a man to do little or nothing else. As a result of this inspection, under one form of the system, a school may be accepted in its entirety, even though some special department be ill conducted. Under another form, adopted many years ago in the institution I have the honor to represent, a college may accept the work of one part of the school and reject the rest.

If the schools sending students to a given college were few in number, or if an adequate supply of competent examiners could be secured to permit their spending considerable time in frequent inspection of the work of each school, the verdict would generally be very reliable. As things have actually stood, such inspection

has often tended to degenerate into a purely perfunctory visitation, in which the presence of the examiner upsets the equilibrium of the establishment for a few hours and secures practically no other tangible results. On the other hand, it must in all fairness be recognized that many institutions make extremely systematic efforts to render their inspections exhaustive and accurate. Moreover, in many parts of the country we now have organizations similar to your own which undertake to pass upon the standing of the school. The influence of such associations, so far as my knowledge extends, has been unequivocally bracing and helpful.

By institutions which do not employ it—and by certain faculty members of some that do—the certificate system is anathematized as the last resort of feeble colleges, which otherwise would starve for lack of students. Its adoption is regarded as a bid for popularity and for numbers, demoralizing alike to him who gives and to him who receives. It is supposed to involve the ignominious surrender by the college of its autonomy and self-respect.

In the western state universities where it chiefly grew up, having originated at my own alma mater upward of forty years ago, it was in the first instance patterned upon the German *Abiturientenexamen*, and was not meant to weaken the tests to which students were subjected, but, on the one hand, to unify the state educational system, and, on the other, to free the university from a somewhat thankless burden, which it was believed the strong schools could carry quite as well. The weaker schools were not permitted to employ the system.

So far as concerns the overt act of entrance into college the plan obviously foregoes the alleged moral and intellectual virtues of an examination. To be sure, such examinations are all but inevitable incidents of graduation from an approved school, but as ordinarily conducted they are examinations devoid of much of the impressiveness of the college-entrance ordeal.

Under the most felicitous conditions the system involves relations between the school and the college of a highly intimate and cordial kind. The college authorities are personally conversant with the circumstances of the school, and do whatever they can to strengthen it and give it help. The school, on its part, understands

exactly what the college is trying to do and co-operates intelligently. The situation produces an atmosphere of mutual confidence, whose value it is difficult to overestimate.

Under less favorable conditions the school may skimp its work and the fact go long undiscovered. The inspection of the school may be imperfect over a period of years, and a failure to check up accurately on the college record of its graduates may result in a slipshod continuation of rights of entrance long after such a privilege should have been revoked. This checking up affords the only unequivocally satisfactory test of the work of the school, and should never be omitted.

With conditions at their worst the college may make no serious effort of any kind to test the school. It may be in fact that which is so often charged of all institutions employing this system, namely, a college catering to cheap patronage and large numbers. Such a situation ought not, however, to be charged to the certificate system as such. It is a symptom of moral degeneracy whose counterpart may be found in institutions nominally employing an examination system. A college which is prepared to secure numbers at any price will find an examination system no serious obstacle to the realization of this simple and obvious ambition. Meantime, such statistics as we have seem to indicate that, on the whole, students who enter college upon certificate make better records than those who enter upon examination. Too much stress must not be laid on this result, although it puts the defamers of the certificate system under obligation to find an explanation.

Dissatisfaction with one or another feature of both the examination and the certificate system has led to a series of efforts to secure the virtues of each while avoiding their several defects. All serious experimentation in such matters is to be welcomed, and the results of such experiments will be watched with the greatest interest. It is not without significance for the advocates of the certificate system to observe that the changes at present being introduced are almost wholly inaugurated by institutions previously employing the method of examination and that the direction of the changes undergoing trial is toward rather than away from the spirit and methods of the certificate plan. So far

as the writer is aware, no institution of the first rank which has ever squarely adopted the certificate plan has gone back to any of the essential features of the examination method. This fact is not to be interpreted as meaning that any competent judge has ever declared the certificate system impeccable. Quite the contrary is the case. But it does seem to indicate that that system in its spirit is peculiarly representative of the educational conditions of our own day.

Three of the combination methods have already been referred to. We pass next to a few comments upon each. And first, the Pennsylvania system.

It will be remembered that under this plan a boy presents a full record of the work done in the preparatory school, together with such other credentials as may serve to inform the entrance committee exactly what kind of youth he is. If the committee sees fit, the boy may be forthwith admitted without examination or, at the discretion of the committee, he may be subjected to examination in any or every subject required for entrance. He may indeed, be refused even the right to undertake the examination. The college explicitly declines to consider itself compromised in any way by virtue of having accepted one candidate from a school. It asserts dogmatically that each case is to be tried upon its merits.

If this system could be administered by a vigorous omniscience—as perhaps it is at the University of Pennsylvania—it ought to be very nearly perfect. It says to the school, “We may examine any or all of your produce, so you must keep it up to standard quality.” To the boy it says much the same thing, and he is put upon his mettle to meet the ordeal if it actually comes. On the other hand, the very excellence of his preparatory work is likely to be the means of sparing him the crucial trial. He has therefore a double incentive to do this preparatory work well. Clearly, however, the plan may relapse at any time into a mere variorum edition of the certificate system, and, unless it be accompanied by a competent school inspection, it might under such circumstances tend to the demoralization of all concerned.

It is not altogether clear to an outsider how a committee of the college is in a position, working with data furnished by the pre-

paratory school, to frame, in advance of a test of some character, a judgment materially different from that of the school authorities themselves. If this be true, the plan in practice must reduce essentially to a certificate system, with the school furnishing evidence upon which certain of the boys' credentials may be discounted. The college may save its face from a downright certificate system in seemingly reserving the right to pass on the individual case; but it is hard to believe that in actual experience the difference between this plan and the ordinary methods of certification would be discernible. As formulated, it has one cardinal disadvantage in comparison with the certificate system of the Middle West, namely, that it apparently does not emphasize the factor of intimate co-operation with the school. However, the writer does not wish to be guilty of the impertinence of passing on this system as it is actually applied in the University of Pennsylvania, when he has had no personal experience of the workings of the plan in that institution. His comments are directed at the seeming logic of the program as set forth in the publications of the University. If there were any method of getting at the scholastic record of the boy, aside from such facts as are supplied by the school itself, the system would be extremely attractive. But the writer is not able to discover ways in which this can be satisfactorily done, and unless it is done the central cog in the machinery, so far as it is distinct from an ordinary certificate system, apparently falls out.

The Columbia system is too new to justify any outspoken judgments of a final kind, but it represents a particularly interesting experiment, and one which, like the Pennsylvania plan, is quite in line with the best spirit of our time in its effort to get away from mere machinery and to humanize the situation. It retains the examination, and apparently cherishes the belief that a large measure of the alleged moral tonic inherent in that system can be preserved even when the candidate knows in advance that failure in the examination will not necessarily exclude him from the kingdom of collegiate heaven. This belief taxes somewhat the credulity of the skeptical outsider, but it may well prove justified by its fruits. Granted such an able and conscientious officer as Columbia has put in charge of the plan, one may well entertain the largest

confidence in the general average of the results. In any event, each lad who applies for entrance is given careful personal consideration by a man who devotes his entire time to this work. In so far as the results of the entrance examinations put into the hands of this officer a mass of facts bearing upon the particular cases, they are undoubtedly helpful in aiding his decision, and in so far they must unquestionably serve to furnish precisely that element of additional information which the Pennsylvania system does not seem to afford until the boy has been denied entrance in one or more subjects and examined.

As with all other human devices, the success or failure of this program must largely depend upon the caliber of the persons chosen to administer it. In the hands of an ill-advised or freakish committee it might produce veritable chaos in the selection of matriculants. Under the direction of a weak-kneed and short-sighted individual it would speedily reduce the entrance requirements to zero, or thereabouts. In other words, it seems to be a capital plan if its administration can be placed in the hands of absolutely first-class men. Confided to any others, it would be hazardous to the last degree.

The Harvard system also is too new to permit an accurate estimate of its actual workings. As a mere program, it must certainly appeal to everyone as an ingenious and promising compromise. The examination feature is retained, but applied only to a limited group of topics; for the rest, the school record is accepted as evidence pro or con in considering the application of the candidate. It will be recalled that the old system was discarded for a variety of reasons. It hampered the freedom of the schools in arranging their curricula; it made it difficult for a boy to come to Harvard unless he had decided so to do several years before the completion of his preparatory work. Many public high schools, refusing, or being unable, to comply with the rigid specifications of the examination schedule, sent no boys to the college, and an undesirable geographical restriction in patronage was a consequence. Moreover, the examinations, like all such, often failed in their most essential function, namely, admitting the fit and excluding the unfit.

One is moved to wonder a trifle whether under the new system a smaller proportion of students than heretofore will be eliminated during the first year; whether, in other words, it will really enable a juster estimate to be made of the fitness of candidates for entrance than was possible under the old arrangements. If this does not prove true, it should be a serious disappointment to the inventors of the plan. That its chief merit will be found to consist in the attracting of boys from a wider territory than before seems altogether probable. Certainly the figures reported for the first year of the operation of the plan appear to bear out this conclusion. This result, however, would have been gained in even larger measure by an outright adoption of the certificate system. If it proves that after all the only test of the pudding is in the eating, if it be found necessary in the last analysis to pass upon the doubtful cases by allowing them to come into college for a period of probation, by the outcome of which they shall be judged, it is not clear that the plan has any great advantage over the certificate system, save as regards the alleged but disputed moral virtues of the examination as such.

There never is any particular question about a large section of the applicants for entrance whose complete school records are at hand. Humanly speaking, a competent person can decide right off that a certain percentage of a given number of candidates ought unqualifiedly to be accepted, that another percentage ought quite as certainly to be excluded. It is the intermediate group which presents the perplexing problems. Experience seems to make it reasonably clear that neither the certificate nor the examination system affords an infallible index of the success or failure of these cases after they enter college. Apparently, nothing but the actual trial of college work can afford decisive evidence. It is no doubt the business of any system to reduce this class of puzzling cases to the lowest possible point. But we shall be grossly deceiving ourselves if we imagine that any scheme will endow us with unerringly prophetic vision. Whether the new Harvard system will prove itself superior to the old at this point and to other systems at present in vogue will be watched with the greatest interest by all of us.

In the minds of many Harvard men—and in this they have many sympathizers—there inheres the belief that a kind of moral halo hangs around an examination system merely as such and renders it irresistibly alluring to the nobler and more courageous sort of boy. By virtue of this alleged fact, they believe that a system involving examinations will always prove of superior attraction to such youths when compared with systems of any other type. No doubt there is a measure of truth in this contention. The pugnacious and combative instincts in the young extend to intellectual and moral issues as well as to those of a physical kind, and it is fortunate that this is the fact. But this circumstance affords not so much an argument for introducing a critical examination at the single point separating the school from the college as an argument for the introduction of such intellectual and moral shower-baths at various points in the curriculum. Indeed, it is the writer's understanding that Columbia has already introduced an honor system incorporating this principle, and that President Lowell has established a similar plan as a feature of graduation with honors from Harvard College. Persons familiar with the history of efforts of this kind in the American college during the past century may well feel some skepticism as to the outcome, inasmuch as in many institutions it was long a practice to have examinations covering the work of the entire year and of the entire college course. These examinations, having been inherited from an English ancestry, were not readily abandoned, and, indeed, only disappeared in the face of conclusive evidence that they failed to accomplish any seriously useful purpose. This may have been the fault of the methods employed, and not of the system as such. In any case, it is well worth a further trial, and the experience of English and Continental universities would seem to indicate that some educational value of high merit is to be extracted therefrom.

### III

If we are not in a position to urge with confidence the conclusive superiority of any one college-entrance system, we may at least formulate certain of the requirements to which a good system must conform. It ought to protect the college from the incompetent.

It ought to assure the arrival of the competent in the college. It ought to attract the able. It ought to augment the sense of community of interests between the school and the college. It ought to enable the school to work out its own inner life and ideals, while stimulating and assisting it in every worthy way. These things at least it should do.

It may well be that no one system possesses superlative advantages on all these counts, that the genius of one institution is better served by one device, that of its neighbor by some other device. In each case we must believe those arrangements best which are clearly most native to the conditions they are called upon to meet. Any device which cannot be assimilated as an organic part of the situation will certainly fail. It may continue to be nominally in operation; actually it will be disregarded. In no particular of institutional comity is it more necessary to exercise forbearance and mutual respect in judging of the merits of divergent systems. The day has certainly passed when any college can set itself up as a standard to which all others must conform on pain of being stigmatized with inferiority. The educational field is far too complex and legitimate educational ideals are far too numerous to warrant any such vain and narrow verdict. Here, if nowhere else, one man's meat may well prove another man's poison.